

The Effects of Student Involvement on Graduate Student Satisfaction: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

The pilot study discussed in this article investigates the perception of counselor education students' level of involvement and their satisfaction regarding their graduate program experience. It is believed, more involved students are more satisfied. Because there is limited existing data, this study seeks to ignite the conversation and future inquiries surrounding counselor education student fulfillment and contribution.

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As students near the end of a school year, there are a number of surveys they are encouraged to take, such as class and professor evaluations, which evaluate their satisfaction levels with their experience in school. This widespread practice shows universities care about student satisfaction, and in fact, many universities promote clubs and organizations as a means to enhance the college experience. Research suggests that studying habits and classroom encounters are bettered when students become involved in programs like on-campus committees, social clubs, and Greek life, just to name a few (Pennington, Zvonkovic, & Wilson, 1989). This study seeks to understand students' perceptions regarding the relationship between student satisfaction and student involvement..

Astin (1984) defined student involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 300). Involvement may be solely scholastic, such as devoting considerable energy to studying, spending ample time on campus, or interacting frequently with faculty and other students. Involvement may also be extracurricular, such as actively participating in student organizations. Whatever the type of involvement, it can have a significant impact on the student's college experience.

Campus involvement is considered by many to be an important aspect of college life. On any given campus in the country, one can likely find some sort of involvement fair or student organization exposition as a regular part of yearly events. These events are held to encourage students to become involved in campus clubs, and they are usually run by the students themselves. It is believed these events continue to be important on college campuses because of the positive effects of involvement on student satisfaction (Astin, 1993). Student involvement fairs jumpstart student involvement and likely contributes to student-student interactions and a feeling of community, both of which are important themes when measuring student satisfaction levels.

Further research shows the strong connection between specific involvement activities and satisfaction. Involvement in collegiate athletics was found to have a positive impact on student satisfaction, in addition to increasing the likelihood that students would be more socially active in college (Pascarella & Smart, 1991). Another study on student involvement proved that being a member of a Greek organization significantly impacts student satisfaction in a positive manner (Pennington, Zvonkovic, & Wilson, 1989). One study utilized a senior exit survey to measure satisfaction and characteristics of students who were involved, and the results showed more involved students were more satisfied than less involved students (Matross, 2009). Findings from the study also showed these more involved students were more likely to recommend their respective university to other potential students. The results of all aforementioned studies show a clear connection between involvement and satisfaction at the undergraduate level, but still leave the question of whether graduate student involvement tends to provide the same levels of satisfaction. Could it be shown that counselor education graduate students who are involved in counseling-related extracurricular activities would also be more satisfied with their graduate school programs than non-involved counterparts?

Educators are aware of the importance of finding and defining indicators of graduate student satisfaction, however, the authors have found little research on graduate school involvement and satisfaction specifically. While there is abundant research on how to retain graduate students, little was found on using involvement opportunities as a method of doing so. The authors also found many studies regarding involvement at the undergraduate level, but found research lacking in the involvement for graduate students. Research in this area could help educators and students design and obtain a more fulfilling experience in the graduate school environment. Furthermore, education programs may be able to attract and retain more students. Learning the link between student involvement and graduate school satisfaction could be critical for future program vitality.

Research has shown student involvement is a major contributor to beneficial outcomes of the undergraduate college student experience (Foubert & Grainger, 2006). The purpose of our study was to determine if student involvement would have a positive effect on graduate school satisfaction, particularly in regards to counselor education programs. Recognizing that the current published research discusses undergraduate student involvement and satisfaction, the authors felt it would be best to first conduct a pilot study with the graduate population prior to extensive research. A pilot study would allow the development of an appropriate reliable and valid instrument to capture any relationships and associations between graduate student involvement and satisfaction. For the purpose of this study, active student involvement was defined as participating in 10 or more hours of graduate counseling-related extracurricular activities per semester. The 10 hour minimum was approximated based on the total number of possible extracurricular hours available per semester (20) divided by two. The 20 hours was determined based on the hours of volunteering required by most on campus student organizations. Clubs and organizations that have membership volunteer requirements averaged a 20 hour per semester standard. It was anticipated that the most involved students would also be the most satisfied.

Methods

Participants and Sampling

This pilot project is a descriptive research study using a survey method. The potential population included all of the Master's Counselor Education students in the State of

Alabama, who attended Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) institutions; this yielded approximately 50 eligible students. The researchers chose Alabama programs to participate in the pilot study because of convenience and proximity to their home institution. Of the approximately 50 students who were eligible to participate, fourteen (14) counselor education internship students took part in this study. Twelve counseling students were female and two were male. Internship students were specifically solicited because it was believed such a student would be able to give an accurate account regarding satisfaction throughout their program experience. Students who were not at the internship stage have not experienced the entire program and may be unable to offer a comprehensive opinion of the program.

The distribution of the research survey was handled by the internship coordinators at the various state institutions. As the investigators were not present when the data was collected, it is unknown why the researchers had only 14 responses to the pilot study, with an estimated 50 possible participants. We believe either a number of students chose not to participate, or the institutions themselves did not distribute the surveys. Demographic information on the 14 student participants is presented in Table 1.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was divided into two main sections. The first section consisted of 12 demographic questions. Participants were asked their age, gender, ethnicity, employment status and GPA. The second section used a 4-point Likert-type scale to ask participants to rate their overall satisfaction on 17 different items regarding involvement. Questions were asked based on the constructs provided in a survey constructed by Yin and Lei (2007). These constructs included: amount of extracurricular involvement in hours per semester, program required involvement, voluntary involvement, satisfaction rates, and attrition rates. Questions and statements were formulated based on these concepts. Students' satisfaction was rated by questioning whether they would recommend their institution to others, and asking students to agree or disagree with the statement "I am satisfied with my graduate school experience". In order to give an accurate picture of the participants' extracurricular counseling related involvement, the researchers made modifications to a previously used survey instrument. These modifications were also able to provide an accurate picture of the participants' satisfaction level with their graduate school experience, by asking questions directly related to graduate school satisfaction through a forced-answer format. Appropriate permission was elicited and granted to use the instrument with these slight modifications. Each question was re-designed to measure one variable, either involvement or satisfaction. Also, the forced choice statements were in ordered from "Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree," reducing possible responses from 5 to 4. Neutral options were avoided in an effort to obtain the most accurate answer possible. The authors felt the forced choice answers would provide more accurate results as students may feel guilty by being honest. The researchers also did not want the students to assume a position of ambiguity; it is believed the neutral response can lead to this behavior.

To establish validity of the instrument, the authors conducted a review of literature and utilized a panel of experts (Counselor educators and research design experts) to generate items found in this instrument. Because this study is a pilot, it is hoped that the results will help us further refine the instrument for a larger future inquiry. The instrument was reviewed a second time by the panel before being distributed

Procedures

Participants were intern-level Counselor Education graduate students attending CACREP accredited programs in the state of Alabama. The state has eight CACREP accredited programs, all of which were invited to participate in the pilot study. University internship coordinator instructors were mailed participation packets inclusive of an instructor's script, informed consent waivers for all potential students, and surveys. All participants were aware that their surveys were anonymous. All participants were asked to answer the survey with honest reflection of their graduate school satisfaction and extracurricular involvement. Each participating program was coded as belonging to a particular region, so they could be identified later in data comparison. Each school was given a 14-business day deadline to return completed packets in stamped envelopes provided in the participation packets. Professors received follow up e-mails one week prior to the deadline so they could encourage their students' participation. If requested, programs were allowed a deadline extension to ensure participation.

Of the fourteen (14) participants, 78.6% of our participants were female; the remaining 14.3% were male. The majority of the participants were between the ages of 25 and 35 (57.1%), followed by the age ranges 19-25 (28.6), and 50 and older (14.3%). In terms of ethnicity, the majority was Caucasian (92.9%) with a small percentage being African American (7.1%). A majority of the students were part-time (57.1%) compared to full-time (28.6%). Conversely, 42.9% of the participants worked full-time as opposed to 35.7% who were employed part-time; 21.4% were unemployed. Lastly, 80.6% of the participants were members of the counseling honor society, while 19.4% were not.

Results

The authors hypothesized that the most involved students would also be the most satisfied with their graduate school experience. Specifically in regards to counselor education, it was believed if a student was involved in 10 or more hours of counseling-related extracurricular activities per semester, they would likely be satisfied with their graduate school experience. While the results did not show involved students were dissatisfied with their graduate school experience, the results also did not prove involvement had a positive effect on satisfaction. Due to the low number of participants, results were limited to frequency counts and percentages. The frequency responses were tabulated using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 18.0. Descriptive statistics included measurements of means, and percentages were also documented.

In response to a statement about the importance of counseling-related extracurricular activities such as professional networking, 71.4% either agreed or strongly agreed professional networking was the most important benefit of counseling-related extracurricular activities. Close to 80% of participants reported disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that resume building was the most important benefit of counseling-related extracurricular activities. Although these results are not directly related to the hypothesis, they do provide possible insight as to motivation for students participating in the outside classroom activities.

When asked how many hours of extracurricular involvement students participated in each semester, 14.3% reported 0 hours of involvement and 42.9% reported 1 to 5 hours of involvement. The remaining 42.8% reported more than 5 hours of involvement. In terms of graduate school satisfaction, 92.9% stated they were "very satisfied" with their graduate counseling program. Comparing the frequency responses of these two questions show that

while over half of participants reported 5 hours or fewer of extracurricular involvement, over 90% reported being very satisfied.

Our results showed 57.2% of participants had 5 or fewer hours of extracurricular counseling involvement. The researchers believe in future studies, "extra-curricular counseling involvement" should be better explained and include examples such as volunteering at a local crisis center, being an active member of professional organizations, and networking at professional conferences. The explanation would give a clearer idea of what is being asked of the students. The researchers have a feeling a number of students are involved and may not be aware that their activities fit our operational definition.

Discussion

The strongest trend from our results was the reported importance for social networking opportunities among Counselor Education students, with the majority of participants stating they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Many students reported extracurricular involvement was strongly linked to a desire to network socially with other students and professionals in the field. This link was identified as important to students looking for future professional opportunities as well as the need for social relationships among peers and professors; thus networking could elicit satisfaction. The strong interest in making contacts has lead us to wonder if professional networking specifically leads to student satisfaction with their graduate school program rather than generic involvement.

The findings from this study bring new information to the literature regarding the perspectives of graduate counseling students on their overall graduate program experience. In terms of instrumentation, significant gains were documented, as there was previously no tool available for assessing programs in this regard. Because of the low number of responses, the research tool used in the study could not be validated.

On a more practical level, the results of this investigation do start a discussion on the factors contributing to student satisfaction and the sacrifices students are willing to make to complete graduate counseling programs. Counselor educators may not always be aware of student demographics such as proximity to campus, familial obligations, and overall happiness that contribute to their satisfaction in school. Counselors may also simply wish to know the various thresholds of happiness of graduate counseling students. It is apparent from this study, some students can be minimally involved, but still be very excited and satisfied with their graduate experience.

There were some limitations related to this study, most of which were inherent in an ex post facto study. A major limitation to this study was the overall statistical analysis and low participant turnout. We, the researchers, were hoping to show causation via strong correlations and factor analysis. However, we did not meet the requirements for conducting such statistics.

Because the study was a pilot study, one of the goals was to validate the instrument. However, there were not enough participants to complete the correlation statistical analysis. Moreover, in relation to the experimental design, such variables like marital status and proximity from the graduate campus were possibly perplexing to the study. Because of the confusion, it is not known if there were participants who had less time to be involved, but remain satisfied with their programs because they have no desire to be involved, or if participants were satisfied with their program, however, simply chose to be unininvolved.

Another limitation was the inability to control confounding variables. Variables such as marital status and proximity from the graduate campus were possible confounds in the study. Due to these variables, it is impossible to know the constraints on time each participant faced, which could keep them from extracurricular activities.

A follow up study is definitely necessary for a number of reasons. In terms of instrumentation, a stronger and larger sample will help in establishing validity and reliability. Also, the larger sample will allow stronger statistical analysis. A multiple regression would be ideal in determining the relationship between student involvement and graduate satisfaction. A factor analysis would be beneficial in determining the factor, which contributes to students being involved.

The follow up study may wish to consider the possible effects of counselor education programs requiring extra-curricular involvement. Forced participation could have the opposite effect on student satisfaction, yet many programs have mandated supplemental program activities. The strong interest in making contacts has lead us to wonder if professional networking specifically leads students being satisfied with their graduate school program rather than generic involvement.

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